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Willson, Nicole Louise

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Sartorial insurgencies: Rebel women, headwraps and the revolutionary Black Atlantic

Nicole Willson

School of Humanities, Language and Global Studies, Institute for Black Atlantic Research, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK

ABSTRACT

This study interrogates the trope of the "tropical temptress" that dominated colonial print culture. Encoded in textual accounts reliant on this trope, it posits, is a subtextual fear of Black female agency. To excavate and rehabilitate the voices of women that have been both occluded and co-opted by the colonialist archive, it recognises a need to look beyond. It takes its cue from Danielle Skeehan, who seeks out traces of Black female insurgency in "extra-discursive and material texts," privileging the material transcripts that bear unique witness to Black women's experiences in the age of slavery. Focusing on the symbolic importance of Afro-Creole headwraps within the revolutionary Black Atlantic and, in particular, within the context of revolutionary Saint-Domingue, it shows how women of colour in the colonial circum-Caribbean authored their own powerful revolutionary counternarratives to colonial dominance through acts of creativity, ingenuity and domestic labour.

KEYWORDS

Saint-Domingue; Black Atlantic; women of colour; Afro-Creole culture; fashion; textiles; revolution; headwraps

The Haitian Revolution unfolded as an insurgency led by enslaved and free people of colour in the French colony of Saint-Domingue in 1791. While complex, multifaceted and sectarian in nature, it united common interests in an eventual quest for independence from colonial rule, resulting in the overhaul of a comprehensive colonial infrastructure and the formation, in 1804, of the first independent Black nation-state. That this event had a convulsive impact on the Atlantic World, and on those economies undergirded by an enslaved labour force, cannot be overstated. While the fallout of this revolutionary saga generated, among some Atlantic luminaries, a moral awakening that precipitated the end of the Atlantic slave trade, it called into question the legitimacy and morality of economies built upon racial slavery more generally. It also inspired a sense of gothic romance that magnified the "horrors" of Black retribution. Indeed, the "horrors of St. Domingo," a phrase borrowed from the title of Leonora Sansay's epistolary romance *Secret History* (1808), became a motif that was frequently redeployed in colonial Atlantic print culture, compounded by images of severed heads, impaled babies, and burning colonial settlements. Such tropes of depredation and violence continue to be deployed against Haiti in service of a western imaginary besieged by the threat of rebellious Black bodies.[1]

CONTACT Nicole Willson nlwillson@uclan.ac.uk

The colossal, transgenerational ramifications of this revolutionary saga nevertheless point to its complex historic and enduring agency across the longue durée. The Haitian Revolution does not sit neatly within a linear trajectory, nor can it be understood as a singular event. Rather, it had multiple articulations across the Americas and beyond. While revolution erupted on the battlefront, it was also realised in acts of insurgency by multitudes of women, children and men in Saint-Domingue, and across the Black Atlantic. These acts, so often occluded, silenced and suppressed, remain inscribed in the expressive, visual and material cultures that operated on the margins of colonial societies. These vehicles of expression were central to shaping a rebellious Black poetics across the African diaspora and can be used to vitally and creatively reimagine and reassemble the revolutionary narratives of those that have been relegated to archival silence – most especially the voices of Black women, whose services to the revolutionary history of Haiti and to the wider revolutionary Black Atlantic are even more violently eviscerated by the colonialist archive.

Building on the pioneering work of Haitian Studies scholars such as Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Colin Dayan, Carolyn Fick, Doris Garraway, and Marlene Daut, as well as Atlantic World and Caribbeanist scholars such as Sara E. Johnson and Danielle Skeehan, this study harnesses an interdisciplinary analytical framework that draws on literary studies, material cultural studies, art history, and African Atlantic studies in an attempt to penetrate the silences that pervade colonial texts, excavating traces of insurgency embedded in alternative sources. It builds chiefly on Skeehan's assertion that a "study of Caribbean publics invites […] a turn to the extra-discursive or material text" in order to resituate the unheard voices and reassemble the insurgent voices of women of colour in revolutionary Saint-Domingue and across the wider colonial Atlantic.[2] It also advocates for a methodology that, like Johnson's study of trans-colonial collaboration among insurgent Afro-Creole communities in the colonial Americas, "involves speculation," which is vital to expanding such possibilities.[3]

Material culture provides a gateway to multiple narrative possibilities unrealised by the elite, androcentric and colonialist framework of the textual archive. Textiles, in particular, have served a multitude of expressive functions in African diasporic communities across the Atlantic World. Fabrics have been used to create quilts that tell stories of struggle and survival; utilised in the service of Afro-Creole carnival celebrations from Jonkonnu in Jamaica to Kanaval in Haiti; and figured centrally in acts of worship, such as in Vodou flag-making rituals.[4] Building on this logic, this article focuses on the rebellious symbolism of Afro-Creole headwraps, sometimes referred to in the colonial lexicon as madras, turbans, bandanas, handkerchieves or tignons. While these objects, varied and elaborate in their manifestations, became enforced in some colonial Caribbean societies as markers of racial difference, they were also bound up with a gendered and racialised colonial mythology of seduction, excess and degeneracy. Embedded at the root of this mythology, however, is a subtext of Black female resistance. By reading revolution as both physically and metaphorically embodied by women of colour in the Black Atlantic, this article attempts to map symbolic and structural systems of colonial oppression and imaginative and material routes to Black insurgency. In this way, it seeks to tease out some of the social and cultural complexities of colonial slave economies that, in essence, sought to constrain the radical and transformative elements of the colonial population while inadvertently handing those radical elements the very tools through which to subvert,

circumvent and obstruct the colonial system. In this sense, it uses the Haitian Revolution as a centralising motif in thinking through acts of creative and cultural insurgency across the Black Atlantic – especially among Afro-Creole communities in the circum-Caribbean – while also acknowledging the cultural distinctiveness of these communities across diverse localities. It also looks beyond the historical and geographical parameters of slavery to reveal the enduring cultural legacies left by the sartorial insurgencies of women of colour across the diaspora in the present day.[5]

Interrogating the motif of the "tropical temptress": anxieties of race, sex and coloniality in the slaveholding Atlantic

As Marlene Daut has compellingly established, women of colour entered the gothic romance of the Haitian Revolution as "tropical temptresses."[6] Questions of agency and subjectivity were constrained by a colonialist narrative of sexual deviancy and moral corruption that presented them as arbiters of colonial degeneration and, ultimately, contamination. For example, Alexandre Stanislas (better known as the baron de Wimpffen), who travelled to Saint-Domingue several years before the slave uprisings of 1791, expressed his revulsion for the colony's "black, yellow, [and] livid complexioned mistresses," whose sole ambition, he argued, was to "brutify and deceive" white men.[7] The distinction that de Wimpffen and other colonial commentators made between various gradations in skin tone in slaveholding societies drew heavily on natural historical discourses of classification, which shaped racial taxonomies that reinforced the "horror" of *mésalliances* between white colonists and women of colour. Such narratives undoubtedly fed into mythologies of Black female monstrosity and hyper-sexuality that pervaded colonial narratives of the Caribbean and the slaveholding Americas more broadly. However, as Daut notes, these accounts "unwittingly" provide "an enormously varied, uncertain and unstable picture of women of colour as radical and rebellious."[8] Indeed, encoded in de Wimpffen's taxonomical observations was an uncanny realisation that the matrilineal slave system was being overturned by those at its root.

This uncanny realisation would reach its apotheosis in Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry's natural history, *Déscription Topographique, Physique, Civile, Politique et Historique de la Partie Francaise de l'isle de Saint-Domingue*. Published in Philadelphia in 1797 when Moreau was exiled from the French metropole (though written some years prior to the Haitian Revolution), Moreau's *Déscription* offers a prurient insight into the excesses of racial "amalgamation" in Saint-Domingue and into the wider currents of creolisation to which the revolutionary Black Atlantic bore witness. Moreau, a Martinican Creole who had served public office in Saint-Domingue and represented the interests of slaveholders in the Estates General, authenticated and compounded the monstrosity of de Wimpffen's racial vision. This included a graphic illustration of the 128 different racial *combinaisons*, or degrees of racial mixture, that one might find in the colony.[9] This taxonomy inculcated a scale of blackness that was virtually inescapable, regardless of the degrees of separation from a Black ancestor. However, it also demonstrated the necessity for a symbolic formula for a problem that was becoming increasingly difficult to visualise: a problem exacerbated by interracial sex and reproduction. Indeed, as Colin Dayan argues, Moreau's "system" eventually falls apart, because the concept of "race" proves itself to be redundant where visual distinctions cannot be determined.[10] Moreau himself conceded the

existence of *affranchis* (free people of colour), for example, for whom colour shows no discernible difference when compared to that of a white (*dont la couleur ne montre aucune différence sensible lorsqu'on la compare avec celle du Blanc*).[11] Embedded within this formula was an apocalyptic subtext: an inherent anxiety that slave-based societies would collapse in on themselves in the absence of a rigorous, racially-stratified system. The need to "enumerate" and thereby circumscribe the corporeal agency of the women at the foundation of this apocalyptic vision of indeterminate amalgamations was underwritten in such taxonomies of racial difference. In the colonial context, such signifying practices thus became used as a critical device of containment for the radical, insurgent and transformative possibilities at the root of anxieties around race and reproduction.

Moreau's attempt to undermine the subversive symbolic potency of these women through a language of taxonomical containment was supplemented by the scorn that he levelled against them more generally in his extensive and contempt-filled commentaries on their presumed promiscuity and decadence. Although mounting tensions between Saint-Domingue's white colonial settlers and its population of colour became more pronounced in the decades leading up to the Haitian Revolution, the propagation of such acerbic accounts lent credence to the free-coloured writer and lobbyist Julien Raimond's observation that women of colour were especially vulnerable targets of white resentment. This resentment, he attested, crystallised into hatred (*Ses jalousies se changèrent en haine*).[12] Such sentiments culminated in a backlash against communities of colour that manifested in a series of proscriptive laws that ruthlessly and disproportionately penalised women. A prominent feature of this proscriptive legislation was a sumptuary law mandating that women of colour cover their heads with a "handkerchief."

In colonial Saint-Domingue in particular, sumptuary laws restricted the types of clothing, fabric and adornments that people of colour could wear in public.[13] Such laws were also passed in the Dutch West Indies and in Spanish Louisiana, where a similar "handkerchief clause" was written into colonial legislation by Governor Esteban Miró as part of his proclamation of good government (*bando de buen gobierno*) in 1786. This *bando* decreed that women of colour be "prohibited […] from wearing feathers or jewels in their hair" and forced them to "cover their hair with handkerchiefs as was formerly the custom."[14] In this way, symbolic racial hierarchies that had been rendered increasingly liminal could be resurrected. As Virginia Meacham Gould notes, "the intent of Miró's sumptuary law was to return […] free women of color, visibly and symbolically, to the subordinate and inferior status associated with slavery."[15]

Such proscriptive legislation highlighted deep anxieties at the heart of the colonial project and betrayed the essential quandary of creolisation: how could societies that spawned limitless mutable racial identities preserve their colonial infrastructures if those very infrastructures were predicated on the idea of difference? Policies that attempted to reinforce models of racial signification within colonial societies, in this sense, betray the very instability of those societies, whose established systems of patriarchal heredity and plantation economics were being unravelled by a globalising network of bodily and commercial transactions, creolising cultures and *mésalliances* that subverted the absolute certainty of these systems. At the heart of this racial anxiety was a narrative of Black female corporeal agency, ingenuity and radicality that threatened to undermine the institution of colonial slavery.

This narrative of female insurgency encoded in colonial texts was reinforced by material manifestations of corporeal reclamation evident in the creative and innovative ways that women of colour circumvented and rearticulated sumptuary laws and thereby affirmed distinct Afro-Creole fashions that remain deeply embedded in Black Atlantic cultures in the present. Beyond the colonial archive of white-authored texts, a variety of artworks, material artefacts and oral histories attest to the fact that headwraps served as symbols of joy, uplift cultural reclamation and preservation and not simply degradation for women of colour in the slaveholding Atlantic world. Certain styles of head-wrapping emerged out of these articulations of sartorial insurgency and joyful rebellion which are defined by visually prominent characteristics such as knots, twists and various other elaborate decorative stylisations that, like the Nigerian *gele* (a Yoruba term for a woman's headwrap), could be achieved through "folding, bunching, gathering, tying, pushing, pulling, rolling, and tucking."[16] These styles made a significant and lasting impression on Afro-Creole fashions in the New World.

As fashion historians have shown, these head-wrapping customs did not emerge in a cultural vacuum in the colonial Americas or as a result of proscriptive colonial legislation but, rather, were part of a rich cultural inheritance that could trace its roots (or at least one of a number of *routes*) to West Africa.[17] As Georgia Scott observes in her geographic study of African headwraps, Yoruba societies set a historical and cultural precedent for head-wrapping customs across the African diaspora:

> [o]ver the centuries, headwraps evolved from a random utility cloth used to shield women from climate to an increasingly important Islamic, and later Christian, religious statement, as well as a socially important fashion statement. The Yoruba were among the first to wear headwraps as adornments. The idea spread, so that by the 1400s, headwraps of some kind were a firm part of many West African cultures.[18]

Given the historical pre-eminence of West African headwraps and the dominant influence of Yoruba culture on the slaveholding Atlantic, it is hardly surprising that Yoruba head-wrapping customs found echoes in the colonial Caribbean and Gulf South.[19] The interconnections and movements that David Bindman has highlighted as characterising Afro-Creole cultures in the circum-Caribbean invariably nurtured these cultures of preservation and rebellious reclamation.[20] By reassembling West African headwrapping traditions in the New World, women of colour were able to reassert their corporeal autonomy and demonstrate countercultural defiance in the face of a colonial infrastructure that sought to obliterate ancestral African cultural identities.

These acts of creative cultural insurgency were not lost on colonial commentators. In his *Déscription*, for example, Moreau's diatribe about the excesses of women of colour inadvertently betrays the headwrap's symbolic function as a powerful and creative tool within the anticolonial armoury. He documented, for example, how women of colour with means (*de poche*) would often wear their head-kerchiefs (*mouchoirs de cou*) very high on the head, and that some women would wear ten to twelve headscarves at a time, one on top of the other, to create a large and heavy bonnet (*un énorme bonnet dont le poids demande une forte d'équilibre*). He also catalogues the types of accessories worn by women of colour, which he suggests add to the ornament (*ajoutent à l'ornement*) of the headscarf, which include beautiful gold earrings, varied in form, necklaces made with gold beads mixed in with garnets, or made of garnets alone […] as well as gold

rings (*[d]e beaux pendans d'oreilles d'or, dont la forme varie, des coliers à grains d'or mêlés de grenats ou bien de grenats seulement […] ainsi que des bagues d'or*) .[21] These observations conjure a potent image of Black women as ingenious, skilful and opportunistic; combined with these qualities, the headwrap works to transform the invisible into the visible, the powerless into the powerful and the marginal into the focal. Such perceptions are revealing, as Daut has highlighted, of an inherent "anxiety about the possibilities, real or imagined, for these women to transgress colonial authority."[22]

The ways in which women of colour pushed back against colonial sumptuary laws and re-articulated their corporeal agency through the medium of the headwrap provide a useful vehicle for conceptualising the manifold creative and "lower-frequency" strategies of resistance and insurgency deployed by Afro-Creole communities against colonialist infrastructures in the Atlantic world.[23] They also demonstrate how the social conditions and cultural attitudes of a colonialist society could be aggressively dismantled through a variety of performative and expressive mechanisms.

Material testimonies of Black female resistance: the Afro-Creole headwrap as case study

The colonial seduction narrative of the woman of colour as "tropical temptress" inevitably obscures real, qualitative insights into the lives of the women that were so central to a radical revolutionary narrative that traverses the slaveholding Atlantic. When language is used as a critical device of containment and subordination, it becomes essential to look *beyond* language to seek out the material possibilities embedded in other forms of narrative expression. Looking beyond the archive for examples of material testimony is crucial to rehabilitating the insurgent stories of those to whom access to textual forms of expression was often circumvented in the age of slavery – most especially the stories of enslaved and free women of colour. More often than not, only traces of their existence remain. Such traces nevertheless reveal clues as to how women of colour in Saint-Domingue and elsewhere in the colonial Americas creatively contested the repressive mechanisms of patriarchal plantation economies and the corporeal constraints of *partus sequitur ventrem* (the logic commonplace across the colonial world that the condition of the child followed that of the mother), especially within public spaces such as the marketplace, where women of colour were able to reclaim degrees of economic power, assert their creative and corporeal agency and unsettle the foundations of the colonial plantation system. The traces of these transactions in colonialist writings highlight fears of a creolising and globalising culture that invited the commercial participation of women of colour and facilitated their ascent within colonial society, thereby undermining the prescribed racial hierarchies of plantation economies.

As a space in which women operated as vendors, consumers, and manufacturers, the colonial marketplace presented multiple performative possibilities for enslaved and free women of colour. Here, textiles were bought, sold, produced, mended, and worn. The transformative possibilities of this domain, and the centrality of fabric as currency within it, is the principal focus of Agostino Brunias's 1780 genre painting, *Linen Market* (Figure 1). Although the scene depicted refers to the colony of Dominica, it articulates how women of colour across the circum-Caribbean pushed the boundaries of slaveholding society, and contributed vitally to currents of creolisation especially visible in the

Figure 1. Agostino Brunias, *Linen Market, Dominica* (circa 1780), oil on canvas (50 x 69cm). Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art.

colonial marketplace, where racial and gendered identities were frequently contested through the exchange and acquisition of material goods.[24] Brunias's painting shows that, within the colonial linen market, fabric functions as a form of social currency, conferring status and power on the women who operate within it. The conditionality of this power is nevertheless compounded through the optics of stratification created by Brunias, who situates the vendors below the visual level of the "consumers" reflecting what art historian Kay Dian Kriz calls a "hierarchically ordered community of people of color."[25] The force of (light-skinned) female agency within this nexus is reinforced by the strategic placement of white men, who frame their interactions as observant bystanders or as chaperones who carry the purchases of their presumed paramours.

A racially ambiguous but noticeably light-skinned woman (Kriz presents her as a light-skinned *"mulâtresse"*) occupies the centre foreground, perusing the stalls and inspecting fabrics that catch her eye.[26] Arrayed in a fine, delicate gown, likely composed of silk or muslin, she wears an elaborate headwrap that pulls back her hair, offsetting her jewelled earrings and necklace, drawing the observer's gaze to her face and décolletage. This representation invariably chimes with Moreau's depiction of Saint-Domingan women of colour that similarly used headwraps to create an impressive spectacle. However, this woman is set in stark contrast to the Black female market traders and the Black maidservant who attends her, shading her from the sun with a parasol. Indeed, while these women are likewise depicted wearing headwraps, these adornments are strikingly different in composition and style; none, for example, match the height or elaborate detail of the headwrap worn by the light-skinned *mulâtresse*. Instead, their headwraps are composed largely of plaid and check fabrics that might be identified as coarse cotton or linen. Stylistically, they also bear a closer visual resemblance to the simple bandanas or kerchiefs typically worn by enslaved women than they do to the clearly ornamental *gele*-type headwrap worn by the presumed *mulâtresse*. In this way, Brunias's linen market demonstrates the headwrap's symbolic function as both a tool of social uplift and a marker of economic precarity for women of colour within colonial Caribbean societies. Such garments were invariably inscribed with complex, many-layered and divergent stories that reflected

the diverse experiences of women of colour at the intersection of race and class in racially stratified colonial societies.

These complexities were magnified by the French engraver Nicolas Ponce in a series of engravings that he produced for Moreau de Saint-Méry's *Receuil de vues des lieux principaux de la colonie françoise de Saint-Domingue* (1791). Like Brunias, Ponce focalised on the dress and bodily adornments of women of colour in order to illustrate his point. In an engraving from Plate 25 entitled "Costumes des Affranchies et des Ésclaves des Colonies"

Figure 2. Plate from Nicolas Ponce, "Recueil de vues des lieux principaux de la colonie françoise de Saint-Domingue," in Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Loix et constitutions des colonies françoises de l'Amérique* (1791). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

(Figure 2), the free woman of colour (*affranchie*) is depicted wearing a headdress that is tall and uniformly white, which sets off the subject's elaborate jewellery and fashionable décolletage in a manner reminiscent of Brunias's light-skinned *mulâtresse*. The darker-skinned female *ésclave*, however, is depicted in a state of *désabillé* with a plaid scarf tied roughly round her head as she carries a basket of fruit. The contrast between these women and the function of the clothes that they wear, reinforced by their strategic and symbolic positioning and the fetishistic exposure of the enslaved woman's semi-naked body, serves to affirm the agency of the former and diminish that of the latter. Whereas the the *mulâtresse* dominates the frame, the female *ésclave* is partially obscured, positioned with her back toward the viewer on the margins of the engraving. Her autonomous identity is thus rendered anonymous and her body (and her reproductive organs, in particular) rendered focal. The headwrap worn by the female *ésclave* is thus symbolically associated with typologies of subordination, reproduction and labour, unlike the headscarf worn by the *affranchie*, which serves to reinforce a narrative of wealth and power affirmed by her visual dominance.

Despite the evocative contextual insights that these images provide into the shifting signification of Afro-Creole headwraps across colonial societies, it is important to interrogate the context of their authorship and production. Such artistic depictions inevitably reflect the parochial biases of a patriarchal, colonialist archive that was sustained by the circulation and reproduction of such images. Although, as Kriz highlights, "they do not solicit viewer disapproval" and "their mode of address is not one of social or moral critique," they "reinforce […] written representations of the *mulâtresse*'s pride, love of finery, and seductive power."[27] Furthermore, the kinds of sartorial insurgencies depicted in Brunias's linen market scene are highly idealised; after all, the colonial marketplace was a space in which enslaved bodies could be bought and sold. It also presents a vision of Caribbean society that, as Kriz has highlighted, serves "to banish all thoughts of forced labor, rape, and brutal punishment" from the Western imagination.[28] The spectral shadow of slavery and colonisation undoubtedly looms large over this romantic idyll and jars uncannily with the message of harmonious creolisation that the painting might imply. Given that Ponce's engravings were also most likely produced in France, he probably relied heavily on the descriptions or artwork of others (including, as is evident in this work, Brunias's genre paintings of the Ceded Islands).[29] These works offer little in the way of real, tangible evidence of the insurgent victories made possible by headwraps; neither do they offer up personalised insights into the lives of the *real* women that adopted such strategies of creative insurgency. While they offer clues about the varying degrees of wealth and power among communities of colour in the slaveholding Americas, they tell us little about individual acts or the countercultures of resistance led specifically by women of colour who encountered a wide spectrum of micro and macro aggressions that threatened to undermine their corporeal autonomy and personal subjectivity.

Material artefacts, on the other hand, present a range of creative and interpretive possibilities. The headwraps held in storage in the Costumes and Textiles Collection at the Louisiana State Museum, which date from the early nineteenth century, represent a case in point. These artefacts both debunk the mythologies propagated by colonial interlocutors and offer material clues that help us better understand strategies of resistance typically deployed by women in slaveholding societies. Significantly, the museum

catalogue indicates that at least two of the five headwraps in the collection originate from Saint-Domingue. This record of exchange attests to the transactional nature of people and fashions across the revolutionary Black Atlantic and underlines the central role of women in effecting transactions and shaping cultural perceptions over centuries. Although the information held in the catalogue does not amount to a comprehensive narrative, it offers a multitude of imaginative possibilities about the lived experiences of women of colour whose voices were so often co-opted or reduced to a cypher within colonial texts.[30]

The patterns on the headscarves, for example, offer subtle clues about their function and distribution. Owing to their predominance within the collection, for example, it we might infer that headwraps with a simple check or plaid pattern circulated more prolifically among Afro-Creole communities in the circum-Caribbean than headwraps with elaborate patterns or embellishments. This is certainly substantiated in Brunias's *Linen Market* scene, which shows the majority of women, and the vendors in particular, in headwraps composed of check and plaid fabrics. Such fabrics, as fashion and textile curator Wayne Phillips articulated in a discussion about the collection, were often produced in large industrial scale. The lines on check fabrics provided tailors with a perfect guide for cutting, and scarves featuring these patterns were usually cut from larger lengths of cloth.[31] The majority of the headwraps from the collection exhibit a plaid pattern (see Figure 3), and the absence of a "bleed" line at the edge of the scarves lends credence to Phillips's theory that they were probably cut from a longer piece of stock fabric. Judging from contemporary illustrations, these headscarves were more commonly worn by enslaved women, or economically precarious free women of colour. As Skeehan highlights, this kind of "cotton and linen 'check'" became known as "Guinea Cloth" because it "became the primary textile exchanged for enslaved peoples on the West African coast."[32] Although fashions invariably change over time, nevertheless, the

Figure 3. Scarf, possible Tignon, 37–1/2 in x 36–1/2 in, ca. 1850. Courtesy of the Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans, LA 70176–2448.

proliferation of such patterns throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was sustained by the trade in enslaved peoples across the Atlantic world.

Other characteristics that may offer clues into the lives of the women who wore such garments are traced in marks of wear, which suggest that such scarves were used as either working or protective garments and worn habitually. Certainly, for women with limited means, it is likely that the same garments would have been worn more frequently. The scorch marks evident on the headscarf in Figure 3, one of the two headscarves in the collection of purported Saint-Domingan origin, are also potential signs of industry; such marks may have been caused by the industrial processes associated with sugar production, for example. However, enslaved and free women of colour traversed a range of occupations in both the domestic household and across the wider plantation (and, indeed, beyond) and such marks are just as likely to have been caused by domestic chores such as cooking or laundering. Regardless of cause, we might reasonably infer from its imperfect condition that it was not necessarily esteemed as highly as the owner's other prized personal possessions.

In contrast, other headwraps, such as the scarf on display at the Louisiana State Museum's Capitol Park museum in Baton Rouge (Figure 4) tell quite a different story. As another headscarf of purported Saint-Domingan origin, it exhibits a pattern that is highly stylised and rich in colour. It is clear, furthermore, from the formation of the geometric pattern on the scarf, that this item was produced as an individual piece, and was not cut from a larger piece of "stock" fabric. Evidently, this headscarf served as a fashion item for women of means.

By probing the cryptic possibilities of such objects, the diverse lives of women of colour can be imaginatively reassembled and resurrected from archival silence. The imaginative and creative "afterlives" of these artefacts reveal how they were able to carve out personal

Figure 4. Scarf, possible Tignon, 38–3/4 in x 36 in, ca. 1850. Courtesy of the Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans, LA 70176–2448.

and autonomous narratives in spite of barriers they encountered to forms of self-expression. By re-articulating these sartorial signifiers of racial difference through personal acts of creativity and defiance, women of colour inverted their symbolic racial identities and thereby established distinctive Afro-Creole cultural trends. These trends became so culturally distinctive that white women would also aspire to emulate them.

Depictions of white women from slaveholding societies wearing headwraps in texts and artworks circulating across the Atlantic world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries point to a dominant trend of colonialist appropriation. These representations exemplify a vogue for "exotic" fashions which were nevertheless influenced distinctly by Afro-Creole cultures. The baron de Wimpffen's *A Voyage to Saint Domingo*, for example, bore witness to the manifold "white ladies" in the colony who had apparently adopted the fashion of the "India handkerchief."[33] In Sansay's *Horrors of St. Domingo* the contested figure of Pauline Leclerc, sister of Napoleon and renowned setter of Atlantic trends, is also portrayed "dress[ing] and act[ing] like a Creole" by wearing a "muslin morning gown [and] a Madras handkerchief on her head."[34] The evocative description of Leclerc's dress is compounded by her flirtatious exchange with Jean-Pierre Boyer, one of the free-coloured Generals who led the counter-assault against French expeditionary forces in Saint-Domingue and later leader of an independent Republic of Haiti. By conflating materiality with seduction – an analogy which is heightened by the central seduction narrative featuring Hassal's purported "sister" Clara – Sansay conjures the colonialist trope of the "tropical temptress" made popular by the likes of Moreau and de Wimpffen. Nevertheless, the account also testifies to the ideological transmigration of this trope and its absorption into white Creole cultures.[35]

The popularity of turban and gele-style headdresses among the female intelligentsia of late eighteenth-century Europe, particularly among women such as Madame Roland, Louise Elizabeth Vigée Le Brun, and Mary Wollstonecraft, points to the possibility that the tastes and trends set by women of colour in the colonial Atlantic informed a larger, global market economy. If, as Skeehan suggests, fashions were often dictated by the demands of African markets, it stands to reason that the women that undergirded the survival of those markets also had a significant influence upon them, thus enabling them to "capitalize on the commodity potential for their bodies."[36] The vision of decadence, appropriation, and consumption that Leclerc embodies thus encodes a revolutionary narrative about the dominant influence of women of colour who transformed "a symbol of mulatto women's humiliation" into "a sign of regional pride,"[37] thereby shaping sartorial habits and currents of exchange within the public arenas of Atlantic circulation, trade and exchange. Given the neoclassical turn that fashions across the Atlantic were taking at the turn of the nineteenth century, which rejected the exoticism and excess that characterised the costume styles of the *ancien régime*, and upon which Pauline Leclerc had a major influence, the prevailing influence of these styles attests to the transactional nature of fashion and the cultural influence of the women of colour who orchestrated, or at least contributed to, these transactions.[38] By re-articulating and re-inscribing the cultural signification of the headwrap, these women inverted the repressive symbolic apparatus of slaveholding societies, and thereby created insurgent opportunities for other women typically denied power within the colonial public sphere.

A portrait painted in 1841 by Luigi Marie Sotta who came to New Orleans as an itinerant painter in the early 1840s provides an insight into the historical legacies of such

diasporic transactions and their resonance across the wider Americas. The portrait depicts an elderly white woman, identified as Mrs Leonard Wiltz, wearing a headwrap that echoes the gele styles made popular by women of colour in the colonial circum-Caribbean (Figure 5). This painting bears an uncanny resemblance to an earlier portrait painted in 1829 by Louis Antoine Collas, another itinerant portrait painter from New Orleans, of a free woman of colour held in the New Orleans Museum of Art. Visually, there are few physical distinctions between the two women who occupy these portraits, and any discernible difference is emphasised by Sotta's use of reflective light and refined technique. Their mode of dress and the postures that they strike are virtually identical. The addition of the chequered headwrap further confounds any easy distinction and complicates the problem of racial signification. The image of Mrs Wiltz nevertheless presents a stark contrast to the Moreauvian vision of the seductive Saint-Domingan *négresses* whose headwraps supposedly "len[t] themselves […] to all their caprices."[39]

Once again, it is only possible to speculate as to what motivated white women such as Mrs Wiltz to adopt such fashions. It is plausible that such garments reflected the practical needs of the hemispheric climate – the headwrap functioning as a substitute, perhaps, for the traditional sunbonnet or hat. However, the domestic scenes in which both Sotta's and Collas's sitters are depicted indicate that such garments were also worn indoors much like the mob cap. The colours of the fabrics are moderated in tone, and the check patterns are

Figure 5. Luigi Marie Sotta, *Mrs Leonard Wiltz* (1841), oil on canvas, 31.9 x 25.5 in. Courtesy of the Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans, LA 70176–2448.

analogous to the more generic "Guinea Cloth" styles that circulated widely in Atlantic markets. The sitter's seniority, evident in the wrinkles which are accentuated by accents of light around her face, and the posture that she adopts, her shoulders gently sloping as she sits upright in an armchair while clasping her hands around a book using her thumb to mark a page – an action that indicates that she is actually reading rather than merely posturing by showing her *in medias res*, converge to form an image of maturity, respectability and quiet domestic leisure. Viewed in this context, the headwrap is stripped of any racialised or indeed sexualised signification, serving only a symbol of domestication, which is compounded by the fact that Mrs Wiltz's spectacles are shown resting on top of it, strategically positioned between the folds of cloth. This image offers an insight into the ways in which white women such as Mrs Wiltz appropriated such garments, thereby muting the sexualised mystique that undergirded colonialist tropologies of women of colour who, when wearing the very same garments, were characterised as "temptresses."

Indeed, the distinctive manner in which the headwrap is fashioned, which is reminiscent of the elaborate styles celebrated in the artworks of Brunias and popularised by women of colour in colonial societies in the circum-Caribbean, reflects the subtle revolutionary power embedded in this object. The uncanny shadow of Collas's free woman of colour reinforces the fact that Mrs Wiltz's headwrap has a particular cultural inheritance bound up with the racial and sexual politics of colonial society. The dominant, pervasive and insurgent cultural influence of Saint-Domingan women of colour is subtextually embedded in such instances of sartorial appropriation. The juxtaposition of these portraits reflects the cultural transformations which the headwrap – as racial signifier, tool of seduction, gesture of cultural defiance, utilitarian garment, and fashion item – underwent, pointing to a host of performative, creative and transgressive identities that women of colour created for themselves *and* others. The fetishisation of such items in colonial texts and artworks is thus a foil to their normalisation within wider Atlantic culture, encoding a fear of the powerful transgressive reach of women of colour in plantation societies. The Afro-Creole headwrap encapsulates the defiance of the women of colour who sought to counteract legal embargoes upon their expressive freedoms; but it is simultaneously inscribed with the fears of this defiance – fears which were entrenched in the slaveholding imaginary and exacerbated in the wake of the Haitian Revolution. The ways in which women of colour fashioned headwraps in colonial societies such as Saint-Domingue, Dominica and Louisiana provide vital testimonies of collective and individual acts of insurgency. In these ways (and in a multitude of others), women of colour exerted a pervasive influence upon the tastes and trends of global cultures. The Afro-Creole headwrap thus represents an important motif within the archive of slavery, affirming the ways in which women of colour used their bodies with ingenuity, creativity, and defiance to create narratives of possibility.

Beyond the more subtle social and cultural transformations that some women were able to effect, the influences that they had upon global fashions and the textile industry more broadly afforded women of colour opportunities to contest their prescribed social status within a growing and globalising consumer economy. These women were not only objects of desire within a colonialist seduction narrative, but subjects and authors in their own right, creating trends that circulated globally. Most importantly, they could subvert the colonial balance of power by becoming *consumers* within a society that regarded

them ostensibly as producers. Transatlantic slavery created a culture of conspicuous consumption in which men and women across the racial divide participated. As Sophie White has highlighted, cloth was a valuable and highly prized commodity in the Atlantic world, which had the "potential […] to assert or contest status, to construct community and economic agency, to facilitate or disrupt inter- and intra-ethnic power relations, and even to engineer social control within black spaces."[40] African traders exchanged cloth for bodies, and free women of colour were caught up precariously in this matrix of conspicuous consumption, working and embellishing the cloth produced from the raw materials farmed by enslaved people – not least cotton and indigo. In this sense, the headwrap is a metonym for what Bindman terms the "fluidity" of the Black Atlantic, demonstrating how the very process of creolisation (and the arbiters of creolistic transactions) could effect cultural change and transformation.[41]

To this day, the Afro-Creole headwrap remains a powerful tool of sartorial insurgency, worn by women of colour across the Atlantic world as an expression of Black pride and as a celebration of diasporic inheritances. In 2014, the Haitian-American fashion designer Paola Mathe, for example, launched a fashion line dedicated entirely to headwraps called "Fanm Djanm," a Haitian Kreyòl phrase meaning "Strong Woman".[42] In her visual album *Lemonade*, released on HBO in 2016, Beyoncé Knowles Carter adopts a number of sartorial guises in which the headwrap operates as a central motif that anchors her Creole roots: a motif made all the more compelling by certain visual allusions to the geography of slaveholding Louisiana.[43]

Beyond the realm of popular culture, contemporary artists and designers across the Black Atlantic, including British-Nigerian photographer Juliana Kasumu, Dominican mixed-media artist Firelei Baez and Haitian designer Valérie Louis re-envision the creative and radical stories of Black women that history has coopted, suppressed and invisibilised through the symbolic and strategic use of headwraps. In Kasumu's photographic essay "From Moussor to Tignon: The Evolution of the Head Tie,"[44] Kasumu uses the historical landscape to chart the headwrap's diasporic lineage; the spectral shadow of diasporic "foremothers" is encoded in the visual prevalence of tombs (Figure 6). In her 2018 installation for the Berlin Biennale, Baez created a mixed-media artwork depicting the historically occluded figure of Marie-Louise Christophe, first and last Queen of Haiti (for whom no portrait has yet been recovered). In this creative assemblage, Marie-Louise's mottled visage partially obscures her identity, but her visual anonymity gives her the power of metamorphosis. In this way, she also represents the numerous and nameless Haitian women occluded by history. Her bright red headwrap which, by contrast, is rendered focal, elaborate and dominant, reinforces the triumphalism of this act of recovery.[45] Valérie Louis's textile designs created for her "Passé et Connexion" collection under the auspices of her textile brand Yaël et Valérie, feature a number of revolutionary women icons across the history of the Atlantic diaspora (Figure 7). In each iteration, head wear and hair stylings play a prominent role in articulating narratives of resistance encapsulated by the mottos *J'affirme*, *Je résiste*, *Je m'engage*, *Je proteste*, *Je nourris* and *J'accepte*. By reproducing these narratives on textiles, Louis demonstrates the persistent interconnections between women, textiles and insurgency across the Black Atlantic. Such generative work, with its engaged scholarly and activist impulses, represents an important intervention, destabilising and decolonising the archival narrative through the conscious production of new and alternative archival stories.

Figure 6. Juliana Kasumu, *From Moussor to Tignon, Saint Louis Cemetery II* (2016). ©Juliana Kasumu. Reproduced with permission from Juliana Kasumu.

Figure 7. Yaël & Valérie "Passé et Connexion" catalogue page. ©Yaël & Valérie. Reproduced with permission from Valérie Louis.

In the same vein, archivists, curators and digital humanitarians working across these subject areas such as Jonathan Michael Square, founder of the digital humanities project *Fashioning the Self in Slavery and Freedom* and co-founder, along with Siobhan

Meï, of *Rendering Revolution*, have created virtual communities around the preservation and dissemination of images and objects that reveal the historical interconnections between fashion and slavery in the Black Atlantic. These initiatives render discursively visible content typically locked within the physical parameters of often problematic institutions. That *Rendering Revolution* is a bilingual initiative which features posts in both English and Haitian Kreyòl compounds the anticolonial force of its conservation and dissemination efforts.

All of these projects compellingly demonstrate how women of colour across the revolutionary Black Atlantic have shaped a sartorial revolution crossing racial, spatial and temporal divides. Headwraps offer material testimonies to the creative, imaginative and lower-frequency strategies of resistance adopted by women of colour from the age of slavery to the present. Such artefacts testify to the fact that Black women have made vital contributions to alternative narratives of insurgency that have shaped a wider story of revolutionary activity across the Black Atlantic. These alternative narratives of insurgency demand more critical engagement from scholars that challenge the epistemological limits of histories shaped by centuries of white violence and white silence. The activist impulse of this work presents a defiant challenge to the colonial archive, which has perpetuated historic assaults on Black women's bodies, ancestral cultures and their unacknowledged and unwritten histories of insurgent transformation.

Notes

1. The popular western media narrative of Haiti is built on, and continues to circulate, a number of tropes relating to disaster, criminality and barbarism that it perceives as expressive of the Haitian experience and depicts Haitian people as abject victims of their own depredation. This media narrative was crystallised in comments made by President Donald Trump at a meeting held in the Oval Office with members of Congress in January 2018 in which he referred to Haiti along with a host of African nations as "shithole countries". See Davis, Stolberg and Kaplan, "Trump Alarms Lawmakers With Disparaging Words for Haiti and Africa."
2. Skeehan, "Caribbean Women," 106.
3. Johnson, *The Fear of French Negroes*, 124; I use the term "Afro-Creole," inspired by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's study of Atlantic diasporic communities in Louisiana, to articulate the transatlantic circulations of enslaved and free Black communities in the circum-Caribbean during the age of slavery, and to challenge the Anglophone biases of American cultural studies that often undermine the complex multicultural lineages of the region. See Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, xiii.
4. See Farrington, *Creating their Own Image*; Dayan, *Haiti*; and Polk, *Haitian Vodou Flags* for more on these subjects. Buckridge's *The Language of Dress* also contains a useful glossary of terms that point to the multifarious functions and manifestations of textiles within Black Atlantic cultures, especially in the context of colonial Jamaica.
5. Although headwraps are known to have been worn by both men and women across the Black Atlantic, this article focuses exclusively on the ways in which women, who were often denied the means to create their own historical legacies, strove nevertheless to insert themselves into the historical frame, using acts of creativity, ingenuity and defiance. In this way, it is unable to do complete justice to a fuller analysis of headwrapping customs adopted by men in the revolutionary Black Atlantic but anticipates the further need for such a study.
6. Daut, *Tropics of Haiti*, 198.
7. De Wimpffen, *A Voyage to Saint Domingo*, 49.
8. Daut, *Tropics of Haiti*, 204.
9. Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description*, 1: 73.

10. Dayan, *Haiti*, 231.
11. Moreau, *Déscription*, 1: 20. All translations are the author's own unless otherwise indicated.
12. Raimond, "Observations," 5.
13. In her *Secret History*, Leonora Sansay alludes to this ordinance, detailing that: "[n]o woman of colour was to wear silk, which was then universally worn, nor to appear in public without a handkerchief on her head." See Hassal, *Secret History*, 78. The law to which Sansay alludes is probably the 1779 law which declared: "We forbid them very specifically from affecting in their clothing, hairstyles, apparel or adornment, in an objectionable assimilation with the ways that white men and white women dress themselves, we instruct them to retain the marks that have so far served as a distinctive character in the shape of aforesaid apparels and hairstyles, under the penalties listed in the article below." (*Leur défendons trés expressément d'affecter dans leurs vêtements, coiffures, habillemens ou parure, une assimilation répréhensible avec le maniere de se mettre des hommes blancs ou femmes blanches, leur ordonnons de conserver les marques qui ont servi jusqu'à présent de caractere distinctif dans la forme desdits habillemens et coiffures sous les peines portées en l'article ci-après.*) See Moreau, *Loix et Constitutions*, 5: 855–6.
14. Gould, "A Chaos of Iniquity and Discord," 237–8.
15. Ibid., 237.
16. Wali and Bright, "Gele," 420.
17. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 37. Gilroy suggests that, in addition to thinking about the relationships between "roots and rootedness" and identity in modern black culture, we should also consider "identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes."
18. Scott, *Headwraps*, 21. See also Buckridge, "The 'Colour and Fabric'," 88 for more on the West African/Yoruba origins of Afro-Creole headwraps.
19. Saint-Domingue and Louisiana were colonial regions that both witnessed a high volume of importations of Yoruba people, and of enslaved people from the Bight of Benin. See Roberts, "The Influential Yoruba Past," 178. However, Midlo Hall also notes that trans-shipments of enslaved people from the Bight of Benin occurred between Jamaica, Saint-Domingue, Martinique and Spanish Louisiana. See Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Identities*, 74.
20. Bindman, "Representing Race," 1.
21. Moreau, *Déscription*, 1: 59–60.
22. Daut, *Tropics of Haiti*, 205.
23. Gilroy suggests that Black Atlantic cultures operated on a "lower frequency" to avoid colonial detection. See Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 37.
24. Bindman also notes that "sugar economies," like Saint-Domingue and Dominica, "had much in common, for the production of sugar had a powerful effect on the societies in which it was dominant." See Bindman, "Representing Race," 3.
25. Kriz, "Marketing *Mulâtresse*s," 205. See also Chapter 2 in Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement* for another account of the symbolism of the *mulâtresse* in Brunias's paintings.
26. Kriz suggests that the woman in question is a light-skinned *mulâtresse*. See Kriz, "Marketing *Mulâtresse*s," 205.
27. Ibid., 198.
28. Ibid., 207.
29. Bindman notes that "Brunias had a strong influence on French colonial art in the period." See Bindman, "Representing Race," 17.
30. Loren, *The Archaeology of Clothing*, 18.
31. Wayne Phillips (Curator of Costumes and Textiles, Louisiana State Museum), in discussion with the author, November 2013.
32. Skeehan, "Creole Fashioning," 107.
33. De Wimpffen, *A Voyage to Saint Domingo*, 114.
34. Dayan, *Haiti*, 173;
35. It is important to note that the etymology of terms such as "Madras," "turban" and "India handkerchief" used by these commentators add a layer of geographical complexity to this

debate, and likewise brings to mind the "Orientalist" appropriation of fashions from the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent by European travellers (especially the likes of Lord Byron and Mary Wortley Montagu who were frequently depicted in turbans in contemporary portraits). However, such references are certainly indicative of a need to expand transnational understandings of the types of circulations going on from the locus of Africa during the Atlantic colonial moment. While this article is unable to explore the full possibilities of such cultural and economic circulation, it recognises that the fusion and transmigration of African styles across regions, and their re-articulation in rebellious slaveholding societies such as Saint-Domingue, Louisiana and elsewhere in the circum-Caribbean is perhaps reflective of resilient and revolutionary cultures with deep roots in the pre-colonial past.

36. Skeehan, "Creole Fashioning," 108; Adams-Campbell, *New World Courtships*, 85.
37. Adams-Campbell, *New World Courtships*, 88.
38. Cage, "The Sartorial Self," 193–4.
39. Moreau, *Déscription*, 59.
40. White, "Slaves and Poor Whites' Informal Economies," 92.
41. Bindman, "Representing Race," 14.
42. *Fanm Djanm*, "About," 1.
43. Knowles Carter, *Lemonade*.
44. For examples, see http://lenscratch.com/2017/02/juliana-kasumu%E2%80%8B-from-moussor-to-tignon/
45. Baez, *for Marie-Louise Coidavid*.

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Notes on contributor

Nicole Willson is a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow at the University of Central Lancashire's Institute for Black Atlantic Research (IBAR), leading a research project titled *Fanm Rebèl: Excavating the Histories of Haiti's Women Revolutionaries*. She sits on the editorial board for the British Association of American Studies and has published in the *Journal of American Studies*, *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal*, *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies*, *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* and *Women's Studies International Forum*.

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